

# Memoirs from the House of the Dead

## General Summary

## Part II

### Books 1-3

*by Caitlin Ryan*

### The Hospital (I)

The first chapter in this trio concerning the prison hospital is primarily descriptive. The narrator does not reveal the reason for his stay in the hospital, although we do learn about the illnesses of several other inmates. He speaks of the doctors and their kindness. They are seen as comforters who do not wish to punish the convicts and the convicts deeply respect and love them. The narrator finds himself unable to dispense of Chekunov, an inmate in the hospital who begins to wait on the narrator. Ustyantsev, a consumptive also in the same ward who is very near death, argues with Chekunov about serving "gentlemen."

The hospital is clean on the surface, but the narrator describes in great detail about the hidden filthiness of the dressing gowns which are never washed and begin to smell as one's own body heat warms the fluids from other patients which have been fermenting in them.

A man who has just received a beaten is taken back to the ward and is treated with an air of indifference by the other convicts. The narrator finds it very cruel that a man who is sick must still bear his punishment. He struggles to understand the pointless cruelty of the fetters, which are never taken off, even from a man on his deathbed. Fetters are a moral burden and do not actually prevent convicts from escaping.

### The Hospital (II)

One of the important themes of this chapter is that of the common people. The narrator tells of the mistrust the common people have for doctors, and regard them as being for the upper classes, but once they get to know a doctor, they can't help but adoring him and quickly cease to fear him. The narrator then begins to speak of the influence of the environment on the actions of people. He states that "It is high time for us to stop our apathetic complaining that our environment has ruined us." Sometimes convicts will go to the hospital for a rest and the doctor's will let them stay out of kindness. One man wanted to postpone his punishment so badly that he claimed to have an eye problem and would rub things into his eyes to make them teary and red at night. The doctors quickly figured this out and threatened him with an excruciatingly painful treatment to get him out of the hospital, but he was obstinate and endured the treatment for several days until he finally decided it was no longer worth it.

The convicts never feel any sort of vindictiveness toward the floggers, but this is not because they consider themselves guilty. Rather, the convict who has committed a crime is sure that he would have been acquitted by his own class, who would never entirely condemn him. This is another example of indifference, because the convict has a clear conscience, is morally stable, and therefore takes his punishment as something inevitable because he feels no anger.

Dostoevsky speaks of two Lieutenants who are in charge of the floggings. Lieutenant Zherebyatnikov takes pleasure in the event and even plays cruel tricks on the convicts to make the punishment worse. Lieutenant Smekalov, the old punisher who was replaced by Zherebyatnikov, had a way of flogging the convicts which they almost regarded with

affection, because he managed to make them feel that he was "of their own kind." He has the special flavor of the common people and is genuinely interested in them, and therefore no one can bear grudge against him.

### The Hospital (III)

Dostoevsky expresses a deep interest in the punishment for crimes, and the pain which prisoners feel from the blows they receive. Orlov, for example, was convinced that he was going to die from his punishment, but when he survived the first half, he was joyful and optimistic, only to be beaten to death with the second part of the punishment. There are 2 types of blows: those from the stroke of a rod or birch, and a flogging. Strokes from a rod are considered much more severe, even though a prisoner can survive more stroked from a rod than he can floggings.

#### Part I

Dostoevsky asserts that habit can make men base, and that "blood and power are intoxicants." He suggests that a society in which men are allowed to punish one another is immediately corrupt and that this is one of the most destructive things to society. There are 2 kinds of executioner. He who does it because he wants to, and he who is forced to do it. The latter is of course more highly regarded, although equally terrifying. The narrator speaks of bribes paid to the executioner. Although the executioner cannot make a punishment lighter, he can promise not to make it harder. Nevertheless, the first blow is always excruciating. Also, the executioner takes pride in his art. This is a recurring theme first mentioned with the discussion of the vodka dealers.

Dostoevsky then speaks about hospital food, which is much better than the regular rations, and of the lunatics whom he pities. In the hospital, men live in relative peace and on a more equal footing than they do in the barracks.

### Books 4-6

*by Khalid Jenkins*

### Chapter 4

The chapter opens with the narrator noticing two men speaking to each other after lights out in the prison. One of the men Shishkov, a young civil prisoner who the narrator pays no attention to, but still despises, is telling a story to another prisoner Cherevin, a soldier from the correctional company. Shishkov relates to his fellow prisoner how he came to be married to Akulka Trofimovich, a woman from his town who was the daughter of Ankudim Trofimovich, a rich man who was highly respected. Shishkov first hears from a pal of his who he respects very much, Philka Morozov that Akulka is not a virgin as Philka has been sleeping with her. The two of them routinely get drunk and Philka repeatedly shames the name of Akulka by calling her a slut. Finally, after a dowry is set Shishkov decides to marry Akulka, but still he is plagued by Philka who hounds him about sleeping with Akulka and threatens to beat up Shishkov.

When Shishkov finally does marry Akulka he finds that she is pure, indeed, and has never slept with anyone. Shishkov goes back to find Philka and take out his vengeance against him, but Philka, again, embarrasses him in front of a crowd. So, instead of taking out his anger on Philka, Shishkov decides to beat his wife instead. He beats her mercilessly, and as he is telling the story Cherevin, whose listening, agrees that you must beat wives, anyway, to teach them their place. This becomes a set pattern in their household where Shishkov, who is always drunk it seems, beats his wife, Akulka for no reason other than beating her and because Philka continuously prods him to.

Finally, Philka is taken off as a soldier and on his way out asks Akulka for forgiveness and says that he has loved her for two years. Akulka forgives him and then admits to Shishkov that she loves him because he asked for forgiveness. Shishkov decides to kill her and the next day, does exactly that.

The scene ends with Cheverin admitting to beating his own wife mercilessly because he found her with a lover.

## Chapter 5 Summer Time

This chapter begins by explaining the change in attitude of the prisoners once summer hits Siberia. The attitude becomes one of dreamy escape and the narrator goes on to give an example of the vagabonds who come out when the weather turns over. These vagabonds would rather live in the forest and be hungry, but free to run their own lives. In the warm rays of the summer sun they can choose their own course and live off the land or others whom they look to take advantage of.

Another example that he uses of changing attitudes is the idea that prisoners begin to think of escape when summer comes. Prisoners now get the idea in their head that, like the changing seasons, they too can change their lot by escaping. In this idea rests the notion of change no matter what that change may mean. In other words, even going to a different prison can also mean changing one's lot. The escaping is only the beginning of this process.

### Character Analysis

It is also the season of Lent and the prisoners are taken to a nearby church in order to receive the sacrament. They feel stigmatized because they have to stand at the back of the church in all their fetters, but the criminals, for the most part, are very zealous in the service asking for God's forgiveness, though they are criminals.

The narrator goes on to tell us about summer working away from the prison. He expresses a happiness that we don't find in him very often at this work. He feels that there is some sense of freedom accorded to it that, real or imagined, lightens the load of prison and the work they are doing.

During this time, rumors start to circulate around the prison that an inspector, a general, is coming to Siberia to inspect the facilities of the prisons. The men think that they would be able to get rid of their domineering major if someone will speak up about the evil deeds that the major does and they bicker over this and other topics. Finally when the general does come no one says a word to him and the major keeps his job.

## Chapter 6 Prison Animals

This chapter begins by talking about a horse that comes to the prison to help with certain chores. The horse, which is worn out already, ends up dying soon after it is brought to the prison and so a new one must be bought. The men, as usual, make a big deal out of the purchase of this new horse and take to proving to each other who is the most adept horse doctor. Two men enter into this debate. One is Kulikov, a gypsy, and the other is Yolkin, a Siberian moujik. Kulikov is known here as kind of a quack, only knowing half of what he's supposed to. Yolkin, on the other hand, is an accomplished doctor. He cures horses that Kulikov had already given up on. These two provide another argument for the other men on who is the better horse doctor.

Finally, a new horse is bought and the men take to it immediately. Even the narrator finds some love in himself for the new horse. He goes on to talk about how the prisoners could, generally, find love for animals and he goes on to talk about several different animals and their impact on the prisoners.

The first animals that he talks about are the dogs that end up in the prison. There are three: Sharik, a good natured dog who no one pays attention to except for the narrator, Belka, a disfigured submissive dog, and Kultyapka, a wonderful dog who the narrator takes a special interest in rearing, but who is killed and skinned one night by another prisoner for his coat.

There are, as well, geese that become part of the daily routine of the prisoners. They follow the prisoners to work and become a fun rumor that spreads through town. Yet, they are killed, as well, for some feast.

There is a goat that follows the same pattern of the geese. It becomes a domesticated animal that follows the prisoners around and they come to enjoy its company. But one day the major comes by and orders that the goat be killed and its meat given to the prisoners. The prisoners regret this, but obey.

Lastly, there is an eagle that is brought into the prison because it is injured. Though it is a big spectacle at the beginning, the prisoners soon lose their interest in the bird, but it continues to live in the prison and be fed. After several months, the prisoners again come to think about the bird and have arguments over whether it should be free or not. They finally decide to let it go and so drop it over the prison walls and watch it scramble away out of sight.

### Books 7-10

*by Jesus Sanchez*

Chapter 7 of the second part of the book starts of with a note by the "editor" of the book that concerns the gentleman convicted of patricide in the first chapter. It is discovered that this man was not guilty of this crime, which came to be known after the guilty party confessed to the crime. After this note the focus is then returned to the narrator who begins by speaking of the divisions within the prison. The narrator states that prison life is worse for former nobles than it is for peasants. He lists several reasons, with two being listed as more important than the rest. The first is the extreme change in lifestyle that the former noble has to suffer, whereas the peasant does not experience as bad of a change. The second is that the former noble can only look to his own kind, which is rare, for company, since the rest consider them to be different from them. The chapter finally ends with a grievance over the poor quality of the food given to the inmates. In an attempt to tell the major of their dissatisfaction with the food the peasants line up in the courtyard. The sergeant sees this, becomes horrified, and runs to tell the major, who immediately goes to the scene on horseback. While all this is going on the narrator mistakenly lines up with the rest but is immediately told to leave since it is not his concern. The narrator eventually leaves after much hesitation and confusion about the situation, at which point he goes into the dining area where the rest of the former nobles are located. The major arrives and immediately demands to know who is dissatisfied. Most of the convicts become scared and begin to respond that they are not dissatisfied, causing the major to state that there were ringleaders behind this act. Soon the "ringleaders" were pointed out and punished lightly. After this everyone was ordered back to work, with no further punishment given to anyone.

Chapter 8 begins with the author giving an exposition into the people of his class, as well as others with whom he associated himself during his imprisonment. He begins by speaking of Akim Akimovich, the other ex-noble he speaks with the most. It is soon discovered that this person is very unique within the prison, due to his ability to settle into his environment in such a way that he does not appear bothered, which initially annoys the author. Several other inmates are mentioned, with the most important being Zhokhovsky the Old Believer, who came to be respected by the whole prison for having taken a severe beating on his first day at the jail without crying out in pain. The author also tells of the official division of the

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convicts into three general categories. The first consists of those who work in the workshops. The second consisted of those who worked in the mines. The second group, in which the author finds himself, consists of those convicts kept in fortresses under military command. After this the author relates some of his experiences of his first day at the prison, in particular his initial meeting of the major. At this point we learn that the author had previously been in a military prisoner battalion and then was sent to the prison we are familiar with. During this encounter the author comes to know that the major is a very angry individual, which is exemplified by his yelling at the author upon their meeting. The chapter ends with some of the experiences of the other prisoners that have come to be his comrades, as well as their experiences with the major.

At the end of the last chapter we come to know that the old major had retired from his position and sold all of his property. His leaving was the beginning of several changes within the prison. The penal servitude division was disbanded and a penal battalion had been established in its place. The changes that came to the prison were no as extensive as originally believed. the author reports that life for the convicts was essentially the same as before, with few exceptions. The one important exception was that the convicts did not fear the new masters as had been the case with the old major. It is during this chapter that the question of escape is brought forward by the author. The author initially stated the the question of escape had never been entertained until Aristov Kulikov decided to try their luck with an escape. In order to carry out the escape the two had to recruit a guard in order to get out, which was resulted in being a possibility. The three were able to escape, which resulted in a general commotion. The military officials began to panic and send news of the escape in all directions in a hope that they would be captured. The prisoners all began rejoicing of the news of the escape. After a week of the escape the three was captured in a far away town. The news of the capture at first upset all the prisoners, who quickly got over this and began to make Aristov and Kulikov the brunt of their jokes. The chapter ends with the captured parties being punished, with only the former guard being punished the most severely.

The last chapter of the book, which is also its shortest, is there the author, Alexander Petrovich, finally leaves the prison. He leaves in winter, since he had been first brought in winter. He also leaves with the same person that he had arrived with. During this last chapter we discover that the life of the author had undergone some changes. He now counted with friends in town, as well as within the prison. It was during his last year in prison that he had read his first book in years. We finally learn that his leaving of the prison, although a joyous affair for the most part, still maintained certain sad elements, as he says goodbye to his fellow convicts. The final scene consists of his fetters being cutoff and him walking out the gate, accompanied by a sergeant, to his freedom.